DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 242 CS 204 903

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TITLE Freire, Dialog, and Composition.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Educational Philosophy; *Learning Processes; Literacy Education; Reading Instruction; *Student Attitudes; *Student Participation; *Student Teacher Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Freire (Paulo)

ABSTRACT

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire was largely responsible for the education of the masses of illiterates in his country. Freire operated on the assumption that people have a problem-solving orientation to the world. Rejecting the predominant mode of education in which the educator imparts reality to passive students, Freire held that education "must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction"--a view that would place both parties in a mutual learning relationship. Vital to this is "dialog," an interpersonal encounter in which people jointly categorize the world. Recommendations for literacy education and the teaching of composition based on Freire's philosophy include the following: change teacher attitudes; design the course after consulting with students as to their backgrounds and interests; use thematics that are generated by the group; establish the importance of the process of students' categorizations; view writing as problem solving; encourage student involvement rather than lecturing; encourage students' critiques at every level; and enable students to find regional, national, and world implications in their immediate personal experience. (DF)

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Freire, Dialog, and Composition

LaVerne Gonzalez

At a time when educators, especially Composition teachers, have been concerned about falling S.A.T. scores (which incidentally we have now been told have stablized at an all time low), functionally illiterate students, and the hysterical cries of "Back to the Basics" coupled with the frantic denunciations of "Double Speak," we would do well to consider the methodology of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian disturbed by the plight of the peasants, who, more than any other single indivisual, was responsible for the education of the masses of illiterates in Brazil. Following his plan, a peasant could learn to read and write within thirty to forty days. Considering the enormity of the task and Freire's unparalelled success, we should, at least, by understanding his philosophy be able to extrapolate those techniques applicable to our own situations. In his "Foreward" to Pedagogy of the Oppressed,[1] Richard Shaull comments that Freire accomplished the education of the masses because he operated on a basic assumption: that man's ontological vocation (as Freire called it) is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his/her world, and in so doing moves towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively. This world to which the individual relates is not a static closed order, a given reality which persons must accept and to which they must adjust; rather it is a problem to be worked and solved.

Accepting, then, this basic philosophy that education should be problem-solving, Freire proposes that the present educational system suffers from "Narration Sickness," the outstanding characteristic of which is "the

sonority of words, not their transforming power." In such a system education resembles banking; that is, the teachers make a deposit in the students who become the depositories. Pursuing the process further, we find that the teacher issues communiques, making the deposits which students docilely receive, memorize, and repeat. The only initiative or creativity for the students lies in their becoming collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. According to Freire, "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other." I might inject here that currently psychologists are telling us that true learning occurs as individuals are involved in the process--theory and practice must be reunited in a meaningful way. Certainly this is not the full import of Freire's thought, merely an adjunct.

But let's investigate the "banking system" more carefully. Freire offers these characteristics of the role the teacher plays or fills in this education situation:

a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;

b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;

c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;

d) the teacher talks and the students listen--meekly;

e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;

f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;

g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;

h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;

i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;

j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (p. 59)

Continuing to understand the implications inherent in the banking method, we find that man is viewed not as a conscious being but rather as the possessor of a consciousness: an empty mind, as it were, passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside. Thus the role of the educator becomes that of regulating the manner in which the world "enters into" the students. "Verbalistic lessons, reading requirements, the methods for evaluating 'knowledge,' the distance between the teacher and the taught, the criteria for promotion: everything in this ready-to-wear approach serves to obviate thinking." Such teaching inhibits creativity since, according to Freire, thinking that is concerned about reality--he calls this authentic thinking--takes place not in isolation but in communication. Clearly we might argue that point, but his idea is clear that it is difficult to perceive reality if one is too far removed from it. Freire is talking here of the I/they situation so often operative in the mind of the teacher.

If these are the facets of the educational process which Freire rejected, what are the elements of the system he found to be productive, those elements which enabled him to teach illiterates to read and write in a mere thirty to forty days--and not one or two, but masses?

"Education," so Freire says, "must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students." In order to accomplish this symbiotic relationship, a dialog must be initiated so that more descriptive terms emerge: teacher-student with students-teachers. "The teacher, in this new relationship, is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue[] with the students, who even as they teach are also being taught." Now students are no longer called upon to merely memorize the contents narrated by the teacher, rather, students become "critical co-investigators in dialogue[] with the teacher." Together they will participate in what Freire calls "problem-solving" education. In problem-solving education students develop the ability to look critically at the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; we might call this conscious-raising. Problem posing education, based on creativity, enables students to reflect and act upon reality, and students know this reality through dialog.

Explaining the essence of dialog here, we move from a consideration of Freire's philosophy to dialog itself. Vital to this human phenomenon is the word, within which he finds two elements: reflection and action. Either without the other negates the power. Freire maintains that the true word transforms the world; therefore word-truth is the first consideration in dialog. In addition, a part of this dialog is a naming process. "Dialogue[] is," Freire maintains, "the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world." Thus dialog cannot be a depositing of ideas, rather it is an act of

creation, which must exist in a congenial atmosphere--Freire makes this point much stronger. He insists the participants in the dialog must be possessed of love--love of the world, of men, and of life. Another prerequisite is humility. "Dialog[ue], as the encounter of men addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if either lacks humility." Moreover such dialog requires faith in men, their power to create, and their vocation to be more fully human. Without faith in man, dialog becomes merely a "force," degenerating into "paternalistic manipulation" which we know about and which most often prevails in the classroom. When these three characteristics are present, dialog becomes a "horizontal relationship of mutual trust" between the participants. Possessing these, the dialog must still be undergirded with hope which has its roots in men's "incomplete state" and their constant search. "If the dialoguers expect nothing to come of their efforts, their encounter will be empty and sterile, bureaucratic and tedious." The final requirement for true dialog is critical thinking which interestingly enough generates critical thinking. But this critical thinking does not belong to one or the other of the participants; rather, it is a <u>shared</u> activity. Many educational plans fail because they have been designed according to only one of the dialoguer's views of reality. The content of the educational program must start with "the present, existential, concrete situation of the participants." When educators are not understood, it is because their language is not "attuned to the concrete situation of the students"--the themes around which the dialogue will revolve. These themes interact dialectically with their opposites and are contained in even as they contain"limit--situations from which individuals must emerge."

Following through then, the students engaged in the search for thematics move to generative themes which Freire believes can be "located in concentric circles moving from the general to the particular"--continental, regional, national--they contain themes of a universal character. During this search for themes, it is important that the educator perceive fully the reality of the student. Freire relates this incident, demonstrating what the failure to know the reality, failure to have worked through the generative themes, would have produced:

> In another experience, this time with peasants, I observed that the unchanging motif during an entire discussion of a situation depicting work in the fields was the demand for an increase in wages and the necessity of joining together to create a union to obtain this particular demand. Three situations were discussed during the session, and the motif was always the same.
>
> Now imagine an educator who has organized <u>his</u> educational program for these men, consisting of reading "wholesome" texts in which one learns that "the water is in the well." But precisely this type of thing happens all the time in both education and politics, because it is not realized that the dialogical nature of education begins with thematic investigation. (p. 112)

Of course the objective here is for the thematics which have come from the group to return to the group--not as content to be deposited by a teacher, but rather as problems to be solved. And here we can understand what Freire means when he talks of generative themes because as these immediate themes are discussed, others are touched from which still other problems

to be solved will evolve. "Experience," asserts Freire, "shows that when a suggestion is posed as a problem for a group, new themes appear." Individuals come to feel like masters of their own thinking as they find world views explicitly or implicitly implied in their discussions.

What we have seen actually is a philosophical base for education rather than a primarily rhetorical or psychological base, although I'm not sure Freire would agree with this. Now how does this apply to the Composition classroom, if, indeed it does? One of the reasons for the low test scores and all the rest may be simply that education no longer has any real value for the student. Since writing is such a personal act, it may well be that here is the place where the change must take place that will put the challenge back into learning.

Let's look then at the relationship between Freire and the "higher literacy" or what all this means for the writing program, the implications if you will. First, writing courses will no longer be viewed as "service courses;" our primary goal will not be to prepare students to write acceptably for other courses; our goal will be to teach students to write with all the excitement, possibilities, and power that that skill entitles one. In Brazil, the ability to write meant the difference between a sub-human and a citizen--in a less dramatic way perhaps, writing means that for students, in the sense that writing will open the vistas of the higher literacy to them; it can mean the difference between participators and observers in contemporary society. Freire has injected meaning into the pat phrases like "start where the student is" and "involve the students in their own learning."

Here are a few of the changes I see:

1. Attitudinal--students would no longer be viewed as subjects to be experimented upon, as objects to be manipulated, as pitchers to be filled. This means that an atmosphere must be created in which students can participate in the dialog, in which the teachers do not know the answer, in which their reality is more valid than that of their students. Teachers are at once students even as students are their teachers.
2. Pre-search--perhaps this should be number one; the teacher will consider the background, etc., of the students before plotting the course. Generally this must mean the initiating of the dialog at the beginning of the semester in which these things will be discovered. Free writing is also very helpful. However, there is no way this information can be garnered except through dialog.
3. The starting point for the course will be different--it will begin with the student, his interest, his critical ability. The teacher moves out of center front.
4. Thematics will be generated by the group, based on numbers 2 and 3 above. As students investigate ideas through dialog they will write; and as they write, other topics and possibilities will evolve.
5. From the outset the importance of the word must be established, the importance of the word and the need for responsible use of the word, Word-truth, which corresponds to Freire's naming process; i.e., finding the word with which the student names or under which he chooses to categorize a specific reality.

6. Writing must be viewed as problem-solving. This means that writing should be read, discussed, published; it must be purposeful. Students will perceive their reality; whether at a higher or less advanced stage matters little; they will perceive the immediate situation and write to change that or to alleviate some pressure. A student newspaper appears to be an absolute necessity in which students may raise issues and attempt their solutions. Students will investigate, for example, their own writing process; they will analyze their own reality, in the dorm for example; and they will find the dialectical relationship between an idea and its opposite.
7. Such writing has as a prerequisite student involvement; lectures will not serve. Game simulation, reporting, investigating (suicides on campus, for example), peer group criticism, these are the activities that will replace the worn-out methods.
8. The emphasis will be placed on the critical ability of the students who must be encouraged through dialog to be critical at every level--their reality, their relationship to education, the tasks required of them, the material they read and the material they write.
9. Probably the most important use of the dialog is that which enables the students to find in their immediate personal experience (those things they knew as opposed to those things they are currently learning) the regional, national, and world implications. Individuals do not ordinarily

do this; hence they remain imprisoned in their own little worlds forever victims or, at best, narrow and globally ineffective. The dialog between teacher and student then enables that student to find the larger meaning in the everyday experience; we are talking here about abstracting, about generalizing from the specific--the very heart of argumentative expository prose.

Even as I have listed these, I am sure your mind has been busy with extrapolations--ideas of how Freire's philosophy will in fact revolutionize the classroom and bring back to it the power and meaning; or, if it never had either, initiate these. Nevertheless, as I consider this topic again I find that none of this may be accomplished without the establishment of an ongoing dialog--between students and teachers, between students and themselves, between students and their writing, between teachers and the students' writing, between students and other students, between students and the paper, between students and their audiences. And when we reconsider Freire's investigation of dialog, we begin to understand that real education is impossible without it.

Endnotes

[1] Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971). Pages indicated in the text.